

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

From Different Children/ Different Behaviors

Children of Prisoners Library -fcnetwork.org

By Ann Adalist-Estrin, M.S.

## **Development Requires That Adults:**

- Continuously use new skills and try various strategies as they respond to the child's ever-changing physical and emotional needs
- Modulate the child's exposure to the world and keep them safe
- Interpret social expectations to guide learning and growth.

Each stage of a child's development includes a primary developmental task for the child and a corresponding parenting response. The incarceration of a parent poses different challenges at each stage.

## **Infancy-Attachment /Predictability**

### **Age: Birth - 1 1/2**

In the attachment stage, infants may sense the absence of the incarcerated parent even if that parent was inconsistently available to the child. If a primary caregiver parent "disappears" to go to prison, it will seriously interfere with the development of trust.

Trust can develop between infants and multiple caregivers but the trust and basic attachment tasks of this stage are threatened by multiple placements and disruptions in the relationships with primary caregivers. Infants may also develop anxious attachments or regulation difficulties in response to stress in the family, which also interferes with attachment, trust and the ability to predict the reactions of others.

## **Toddlers-Autonomy /Emotional Safety**

### **Age: 1 1/2 - 3**

Copyright Ann Adalist-Estrin and Family and Corrections Network (FCN) 2005.

All rights reserved.

Provided for use in FCN training events only.

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

In the separation or autonomy stage of development, toddlers seek to test the quality of their attachments in the face of new motor and verbal skills. The tug between the desire for independence and autonomy and the need to be attached and dependent makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent.

The toddler expresses these feelings and conflicts through behaviors that are annoying at best and rage provoking at worst. The tantrums and negativity that characterize this stage of development can really challenge caregivers as they pour emotional and physical resources into managing life in the criminal justice system.

Caregivers may react in angry or unpredictable ways. The base of security and emotional safety that toddlers need may seem unavailable. This can increase toddlers' anxiety and resulting negative behaviors.

## **Pre-Schoolers-Differentiation/ Power and Influence**

### **Age: 3-5**

In the differentiation stage children seek to establish emotional or psychological separateness from their primary attachment figures. They strive to prove their uniqueness particularly from the same gendered parent. The other parent serves often as a refuge from what can be an intense struggle. This is also the age of power and control battles and magical thinking.

“If I cooperate with you, I become you and since I am me, not you, I will not cooperate and if you make me I will hate you and wish you away.” This is not a conscious thought, but rather an unconscious motivator of behavior.

The new demands made by the adult world for self-control may also lead children of this age to apply magical thinking and fantasy to the circumstances of their

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

parents' incarceration. They believe that they are responsible in ways that are both illogical and unreasonable. They also use "transductive reasoning"...if two things happen at the same time, they are related. This further connects the child's behaviors with the adult's distress and circumstances.

Children, who have a parent leave for prison, (particularly a same gendered parent) may truly believe that they wished them away when they were in the midst of the struggle for power and hating them for the powerlessness. When a child's opposite gendered parent is incarcerated it eliminates the opportunity to use that parent as a refuge from the struggle. In both cases, pre-school children may exhibit symptoms of distress.

They may regress in behavior, experiencing bed-wetting, sleeplessness, and eating disruptions. They will also develop fears, nightmares and a return to the aggressive tantrums of toddlerhood.

Pre-school children need to know that they have some influence on adults to get their needs met. Maintaining a connection to the incarcerated parent may be most critical at this stage of development to avoid feelings of loss of control, powerlessness and loyalty conflicts that could have lasting consequences.

## **Early School Age/ Affiliation and Choice**

### **Age: 5-8**

The grade school child is beginning to replace parents as the center of their universe. They will experience sadness at the separation but have moved out into the world. They are learning new skills and focusing on the peer group. This age child is also beginning to understand that there are problems and solutions but they have not developed a mature ability to reason from one to the other. At this stage of development, children do understand the concept of "crime and punishment." As one first grader put it, "My Mommy is doing a really long time

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

out.” However, as they begin to focus on affiliating with other children, they become aware of the stigma of parental incarceration.

Early school age children need to be successful and to develop a sense of competence with adults, but more so with peers. This makes them vulnerable to taunts from schoolmates about parent’s arrest or incarceration yet unable to articulate the story or the feelings well enough to satisfy peers and to avoid upsetting or embarrassing the family.

This conflict between affiliation and family loyalty can manifest itself in somatizations, school avoidance or phobia, selective mutism and poor school performance

## Pre-Adolescence/ Knowing Self and Reading Others

### **Age: 9-12**

This is the stage of social emotions. Children struggle to understand codes of ethics that vary from family to family. They are striving to learn about their own emotional reactions to peers and family members and to read the cues of others. Adults need to provide labels for children’s feelings without judging them. They also serve as role models and teach children communication skills by saying what they mean and listening with compassion.

Pre-Adolescents are also making more choices on their own, about homework, activities and friends and need to be respected for their opinions and tastes. They may choose to distance themselves from the relationship with an incarcerated parent, in part to exercise the choice and also to avoid the embarrassment.

Finally, as children strive to understand rules and consequences and to have empathy for others, adults in their world must be honest and genuine. Acting

## The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

scared or angry but saying “I am fine” seriously confuses the developmental process of this age and may cause acting out behavior in an effort to get at what is really going on.

All of this is tremendously difficult for families that are fragile or overwhelmed by managing without the incarcerated parent. Family members will give children many mixed messages and many of the children’s feelings will be unacceptable to the family.

Older school aged children will need help with evolving social values in the wake of parental incarceration and the family reaction to it. They are at risk for a host of behavioral problems as they “express” the feelings that are not allowed by the family through oppositional and defiant or even delinquent behaviors. They will also need resources for resolving the emotional conflicts that are raging within themselves and in relationships.

### Adolescence Identity /Risk Protection

#### **Age: 13+**

Teens are out in the world, forming a cohesive identity and attempting to assess the dangers involved in the risk taking impulses that come with this age.

Most adolescents with incarcerated parents have typically experienced multiple separations from the incarcerated parent. They have lived through previous parental imprisonments and often a lifestyle that included addictions, the chaos of financial instability, caregiver stress, failing schools and communities lacking in resources. They are often expected to assume adult roles, are left for long periods without supervision and suffer from ambivalence about their incarcerated parent.

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

All at once, teens can fear they will turn out like their incarcerated parent; attempt to emulate them; and fiercely reject them. They also have diminishing hope that their parents will return to them.

Typical patterns of behavior in response to these crises are: rejecting adult limits and authority, aggression, helplessness, hopelessness and depression, drug and alcohol use, abuse and addictions and sexual risk taking

## **Temperament and Coping**

Ann Adalist-Estrin

While the developmental norms will guide adults in understanding children's reactions to parental incarceration, it is also useful to be reminded of the unique aspects of each child. Children in similar situations with parents facing similar charges may react in widely different ways to their parents' arrest and incarceration. Children within the same family even react quite differently. For decades, theorists have looked at 9 temperament characteristics as a way of explaining the widely varying behaviors exhibited by different children at the same stages of development in the same and differing home environments.

Nine temperament qualities described here focus on infants and toddlers. Many children maintain these characteristics into adulthood. Using these nine temperamental characteristics, clinicians can help caregivers to understand the child's innate reaction patterns and unique strengths and weaknesses as well as to see how their own temperament styles affect their interactions with the children.

These temperament qualities combine then, with the child's experiences, relationships and environmental supports and stressors to form coping styles and patterns for children and for families. This notion of temperament is also a way of conceptualizing, not only how a child may behave in the wake of parental incarceration, but also how adults react to them.

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

## TEMPERAMENT CHARACTERISTICS RATING SCALE

After each characteristic, rate yourself on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most active or intense or rhythmic, etc. Mark your rating with an S for self. Then go back and rate your tolerance for the temperament qualities of others with 10 being the most tolerant. Mark those ratings with O for Other.

1. **Activity level.** Some children are active. They kicked a lot in the uterus before they were born, they are babies that move around in their bassinets, and as toddlers, and they always run. They can turn into people who just need a lot of activity and movement to be happy. Other children and people are content with much less activity.

1-----5-----10  
Not very active Very active

2. **Rhythmicity.** Some people have regular cycles of needs. They eat, sleep, and have bowel movements on schedule almost from birth. Others are more sporadic and much less predictable.

1-----5-----10  
Not very regular or rhythmic Very regular

3. **Approach-withdrawal.** Some children delight in everything new; others withdraw from new situations. The first bath makes some babies laugh and others cry; there are children and adults that love to try new experiences and are eager to jump right in. There are also those that need to take a lot of time to warm up to new people, places, foods, ... or anything.

1-----5-----10  
Slow to Warm Up Approach easily

4. **Adaptability.** Some children and adults adjust quickly to change; others are unhappy at every disruption of their normal routine.

1-----5-----10  
Dislike changes Quickly adjusts to new experiences

5. **Intensity of reaction.** There are those that react to things with GREAT joy or GREAT frustration and those that respond to life in a milder, less intense way.

1-----5-----10  
Low key reactions Intense reactions

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

- 6. Threshold or responsiveness.** Some children seem to sense every sight; sound and touch. For instance, they waken at a slight noise, or become overwhelmed by visual clutter or pungent smells. They may turn into adults who have difficulty screening out the world and are easily over stimulated. Others seem unaware of bright lights, loud street noises, wet diapers, or crowded rooms
- 1-----5-----10  
Low tolerance for sensory input                      High tolerance for sensory input

7. **Quality of mood.** Some people's moods switch rapidly from happy to upset. Others can stay in one emotional state for what may seem like a very long time.
- 1-----5-----10
- Even tempered Moods change quickly

- 8. Distractibility.** Most people get fussy when they are hungry or tired or upset; but some can be easily distracted by activities, people, TV or interruptions in routine. Similarly, when children want to do something dangerous or prohibited, some of them can be distracted by another, safer idea while others are more single-minded and stay focused on what is desired.
- 1-----5-----10  
Stays very focused Easily distracted

- 9. Attention span.** Some people stay happily with one task for a long time. Others quickly move from one activity to another.
- 1-----5-----10
- Moves often from one activity to another      Stays with one thing for long periods

(FROM: Chess & Thomas, 1977)

-----

The nine individual temperament characteristics listed here do not, in and of themselves, create behavior problems or interfere with the child's adjustment to parental incarceration. Rather it is the fit (or lack of fit) between the child's temperament and the coping style and expectations of the adults that can cause distress for everyone.

Another aspect of temperament that can interfere with a child's coping is the degree to which a parent or caregiver identifies the temperament quality as similar or identical to themselves or the child's other parent. This can, endear a child when those qualities are loved and appreciated in yourself or another. But when those qualities are repulsive or frustrating in ones self or others they can



## The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

cause parents or mentors to react negatively. For children with parents who have caused distress in the family, their likeness to the incarcerated parent can make them unlikable to parents or caregivers and cause the child to become the target for misplaced anger.

Understanding the role of temperament and the adults response to it (positive and negative) can help caregivers and teachers to see that things like intensity of the child's reactions, the unpredictable moods, the rigidity with everyday activities, or hypersensitivity to noise or touching may be part of the child's personality rather than caused by the family circumstances or bad parenting. Understanding a child's temperament may also help in predicting the child's reactions to new situations, to structure for long trips to visit a parent in prison or to be patient with the length of time a child takes to adjust to change.

Some children will be easy to read. Their behaviors will show you that they are reacting to the stress of parental incarceration. Others will not be so obvious. It is important to be aware that those children who seem to be coping well with a parent's arrest or incarceration may be silently suffering intense emotions. A child whose behavior seems "normal" may need just as much support as a child who is more obviously upset.

# The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children

## Five Family Coping Styles

Ann Adalist-Estrin

*Children abandoned by one parent need to know that there is a consistent and caring adult there for them. The way in which the remaining parent (or other caregivers) are coping with these pressures and handling the crisis, will have a profound effect on the child's ability to cope.*

### The Family on Hold

This type of family often visits their incarcerated member, writes or telephones. They take pictures of events, people and places to keep their loved one connected to their lives. Rarely, however, are feelings discussed. Anger about the crime or the incarceration, sadness, abandonment, confusion, loss, frustration and hurt are all real and ever present emotions that are left on hold to deal with upon release. There is often a focus on the positive commitment to make this period of separation "ok."

### The Parallel Family

Families in this group keep in touch by letter or phone with occasional visits. They have a "life goes on" attitude without positive or negative emotion. "This happened and we'll deal with it." These family members tend to develop their own lives, meet new people, learn new skills and grow in completely separate ways from the incarcerated person.

### The Estranged Family

This family is cut off from the incarcerated member. Sometimes the family has decided not to maintain contact or foster parents cannot co-ordinate visitation. Often, it is the inmate who is unable to cope with the feelings that come with relationships or with frustrating correctional policies.

### The Turbulent Family

Negative feelings are expressed in out of control ways in this family. They are never able to develop effective relationship skills. Contact during incarceration can become hurtful and abusive at worst, or simmering and unpredictable at best.

### The Functioning Family

This is the most rare type of family. They are open and communicating about the crime, the impact on all family members, and how they are growing. They stay in touch with the incarcerated family member, but not at the expense of everything else. This family typically reports having a lot of community support.

## **Mentoring Children of Prisoners: Impacting Lives-Engaging Children**

### ***Stories from the field-What would you do?***

1. Malik (9 years old, African American) and his mentor are driving to the movies and see a car on the side of the road with a police car behind it. The driver of the car is black. Malik says “damn, another brother pulled over for no good reason...if my Dad hadn’t been profiled he wouldn’t be locked up. All he had was some weed...”
2. Nathan meets with his mentor, John, every week. He often talks about how much he misses his father but many of his stories are about how kids didn’t mess with him or make fun of him when his dad was around because his dad would beat them up if they did. Nathan’s dad writes to him regularly and Nate often reads the letters to John and asks John to help him to write back. The letters often contain phrases like “be strong now little man...don’t you cry, I will be out of here soon” (he has at least 5 years left) or “Take care of your sister and keep an eye on your mom” or “ don’t take any crap from anyone and if anyone bothers you, I will kick their butts when I get out.” John says that he told Nate that his father is wrong and that violence is not the answer and that he really does not need to take care of his sister because he is only 10.
3. George is a 10-year-old child. His father is in prison. He lives with his mother and 4 younger sisters. The family has lived in the United States since George was 3. They are originally from West Africa. George’s mother signed him up with Big Brothers Big Sisters because she thought that he needed more one-on-one attention than she could give. Also, she thought that a mentor could help socialize George in the ways of American life. George and his family have regular contact with the father and visit him every other week in prison. George’s mother is a respiratory therapist. She has a good job but still has trouble making ends meet. Nick is George’s mentor. Nick is Caucasian. His family emigrated from Russia when he was 2. Nick is 22 and he works as a waiter, but his passion in life is ice-skating. He plays for a community hockey team and takes figure skating lessons. Nick’s father died 5 years ago in an accident and there was a lawsuit that left Nick and his mother a lot of money. Nick signed George up for skating lessons at George’s request. When George’s mother was told, she said no because if she couldn’t afford to give her daughters the ballet and flute lessons they wanted, she couldn’t let George have skating lessons. It wouldn’t be fair to the other children. George’s mother also asked Nick not to buy him clothes every weekend. She said that she can provide those things for her family. Another problem arose when George’s mother’s work schedule changed and she needed to change Nick’s day with George to Sunday. George’s mother also said that every other Sunday they went to visit the prison, so the mentoring meetings would have to be every other Sunday for a while. Nick was upset because he said he had bought tickets for a variety of events for the next few Sundays. George said he didn’t want to go and visit his father anyway and wanted to be with Nick instead.

## **Mentoring Children of Prisoners: Impacting Lives-Engaging Children**

4. Graziella was referred to the program by the school social worker and identified as a child with an incarcerated mother. The mentoring program is for children at risk, a not just child of incarcerated parents. At the intake home visit, Graziella's guardian, her aunt, told staff that they have told Graziella that her mother is away at school and would like the agency to respect her decision not to tell the truth. After several months as Graziella's mentor, Sarah feels that it is wrong to lie to her and wants staff to let the aunt know that it is not in the child's best interest to keep the truth from her.
5. Nancy got a call from Charmaine's grandmother in the middle of the night. She was having severe chest pains and was calling 911. Charmaine told her grandmother that she wanted to go to Nancy's instead of the neighbors. Nancy told Grandma that she really could not take Charmaine and is now feeling really guilty and upset. She called the match support staff the next day to ask if she should have taken Charmaine and to say that she has been worried about the caregiver's health for some time.